

# Francis Scott Key and the Star Spangled Banner

By Jane Runyon

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The British did not take their defeat in the Revolutionary War too well. They would not believe that they could be beaten by a group of unorganized colonists. The British government believed that if they gave the colonists a few years, the American government would fail and would be begging the British to come back and take over. When Britain went to war with France in 1793, they needed more men to fight on their ships. Britain also needed to control shipping routes across the Atlantic. British ships stole American sailors to fight in the British navy against France. This was called conscription or impressment. Britain also tried to restrict trade between the United States and other countries in Europe. Americans were also upset with the British for helping American Indians defend their land against American encroachment. On June 18, 1812, America declared war on Great Britain.



In August 1814, the British boldly entered the capital of the United States, Washington, D.C., and took it over. By this time, their war with France was over. The Canadians had held off the weak American effort to take them over. More soldiers were available to be sent on the attack. The British set fire to the White House, which was the home of President James Madison. Luckily, he was away at the time, and his wife, Dolley, was able to save many valuable belongings. One of these belongings was a portrait of George Washington. They also set fire to the Capitol building. A rain storm was the act of nature which saved those structures from total destruction.

The British set their sights on taking Baltimore, Maryland, when they left Washington. They were angry with the citizens of Baltimore for allowing private ship owners to capture British trading ships. They were much like pirates stealing the British treasures. When the British reached Baltimore, some forty miles from Washington, they found that the citizens had sunk ships in the harbor keeping them from getting too close to the city. They were stopped near Fort McHenry and decided to make that their target instead.

Here's where Francis Scott Key enters the story. Key was a lawyer in Georgetown, just outside of Washington. He lived there with his wife and eleven children. Key was asked to try to persuade the British to release a doctor, Dr. Beanes, whom they had taken prisoner. Key and an American agent, Colonel John Skinner, sailed on a small ship into the harbor to meet with the British leaders. They carried with them letters from British prisoners telling the British leaders that they were being well cared for. They also pointed out that one of the doctors who had given them such good care was their prisoner, Dr. Beanes. These letters helped convince the commanders to release Dr. Beanes to Key and Skinner. The British decided not to release any of the men immediately. They had overheard some of the British plans for the attack on Fort McHenry. The three Americans were to be held on board another ship until the battle was over.

A year earlier, the commander of Fort McHenry had ordered a new flag to be flown over his fort. He commissioned Mary Young Pickersgill and her daughter, Caroline, to create a flag large enough that the British would not be able to miss it. They sewed a flag containing fifteen stars each two feet long from point to point. There were fifteen red and white stripes each two feet wide. The finished flag was thirty feet tall and forty feet wide. The final price of the flag was \$405.90. That was quite a sum in those days! On the morning of September 13, 1814, that flag was flying proudly over Fort McHenry.

The British started **bombarding** Fort McHenry at 7 a.m. the morning of September 13. The bombing continued for twenty-five hours. Some of these bombshells were carrying lighted fuses. Sometimes these fuses burned too quickly and the shells exploded in mid air. They also shot rockets which left a red glare as they raced across the night sky. These explosions and lights were all that the American prisoners could see through the long attack. When they finally were aware of the silence and realized that the battle was over, they couldn't be sure who had won. They looked over the rails of their ship and were able to see Mrs. Pickersgill's flag still flying over the **ramparts**, or walls, of the fort. They knew then that the American forces had not surrendered. The British had given up.

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

All of the sights and sounds that Key had been witness to were running through his head. He liked to write poetry, so he put his thoughts to paper. The first verse of his poem contained questions that Dr. Beanes may have asked on that historic night. Does the flag still wave? Can you see it in the dawn's light? The second verse contains answers to these questions. The flag is still waving in the breeze. Long may it wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave. Key wrote his poem on the back of a letter he carried with him. He knew the words could be sung to the tune of an old British drinking song, "To Anacreon in Heaven." He gave his poem to his brother-in-law who had it printed and sent to cities throughout the states. Americans delighted in singing the words of victory. It wasn't until March 3, 1931, that the "Star Spangled Banner" was officially adopted as our national anthem.

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## Questions

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\_\_\_\_\_ 1. In what year did the Americans declare war on the British?

- A. 1812
- B. 1810
- C. 1816
- D. 1814

2. What was the Americans' purpose in declaring war?

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3. Why was Francis Scott Key sent to Baltimore?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 4. Why did the British want to take over Baltimore?

- A. They thought it was an easy target.
- B. It was close to Washington.
- C. They were mad that their trading ships were being taken by privateers from Baltimore.
- D. They were still mad because they had been defeated in Baltimore during the Revolutionary War.

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. Dr. Beanes had been helping the British prisoners.

- A. True
- B. False

6. Why were Key, Beanes, and Skinner held on a British ship during the battle?

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Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. In what form did Key's words appear?

- A. An essay
- B. A letter
- C. An article
- D. A poem

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. How long did it take Key's song to become our national anthem?

- A. Less than a year
- B. More than one hundred years
- C. More than a millennium
- D. Less than a decade

**Why was the "Star Spangled Banner" written? What were the circumstances that caused it to be written?**

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**Recite the "Star Spangled Banner" as a poem. What do the words ramparts and perilous mean?**

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